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America's New Conception of Thrift

FOREWORD

FOR many years prior to the Great War the term thrift carried to the minds of many Americans several unfortunate connotations. It was frequently associated with parsimony, niggardliness, miserliness and other traits which every liberal and generous-hearted American properly thought very unbecoming to one who shared the bounteous resources, the great opportunities and freedom of the Western World. But the tremendous struggle which threatened not only to shackle the Old World, but even to rob the New World of its cherished liberties brought home to our people a new conception of thrift, in fact, an appreciation of true thrift and a realization of the fatal consequences of clinging to old misconceptions.

Many realized for the first time that it was a matter of life and death to thousands of soldiers and of civilians also, whether they wasted or whether they conserved food and fuel; whether by demanding non-essentials they diverted labor, materials and machinery to making these non-essentials, or whether they freed this labor to fight in the trenches or to supply those who fought, or to feed and clothe those who supplied the fighters. We learned of our economic unity and interdependence as never before, we saw that the real army consisted not only of the men in uniform, but of the entire people who supported them. Anybody who wasted or misdirected the use of labor or materials or machinery or land or any other productive factor was a public enemy for, by so doing, he weakened the forces in the front

lines or, what was just as important, the great civilian army behind the trenches.

Food that went to the garbage pail and labor that was idle represented only the most obvious kind of waste. Brain, brawn, material and equipment that were misdirected, that were used for second-class purposes when they could have been used for first-class purposes, were to that extent wasted. On the proper use of these capacities and resources hung not only the life and death of the soldiers and civilians but, also, the progress of civilization itself.

Thrift was thus impressively shown to Americans in its true light. Instead of suggesting stinginess, it came to connote *proper use*, the use of means in such a way as to achieve the greatest results. It was closely associated with effectiveness, loyalty, patriotism, victory. It took a new place, an exalted place, its true place in popular estimation.

Though the call for thrift, that is, the proper use of capacities and resources, was more dramatic and insistent during the war than it is in peace time, nevertheless, its importance for the long run happiness of the race was no greater then than it is now. It is true that economies and sacrifices that were needed then would not be justifiable now. Proper use always implies adjustment and adaptation to existing circumstances and conditions, and this requires that an eye be kept on the future all the while.

Man is so constituted that he has a recurring series of wants. Regardless

of how much food he may have on hand he cannot eat enough today to satisfy his hunger for all time. He requires a constant stream of income in the form of food, clothing and fuel, to satisfy his needs. As certain primal needs are satisfied, other desires make themselves felt and he is stimulated to produce more things to satisfy these desires also. For all practical purposes, man's wants seem capable of indefinite expansion. The satisfaction of all of them requires an indefinite expansion of production, not an indefinite increase in the production of bread for any one man, but after sufficient bread, then better bread, better clothes, better houses, automobiles, aeroplanes, music, painting, literature, leisure to philosophize, to think on higher things.

That individual, that family or that nation which consumes daily or yearly all that it produces can never progress. If it considers today only, if it takes no thought of the future, it is doomed to stagnation if not to death. But by devoting part of current energy to producing tools and other equipment, the productive capacity of following years is increased, and it soon becomes possible to satisfy more and more current wants and at the same time to devote more energies each year to the increase of equipment. This process is cumulative.

The increase of productive capacity through the improvement of health, technical skill and education is just as important as the increase of machine equipment or land fertility. In fact, the piling up of highly perishable goods can not go very far and the accumulation of durable consumption goods like clothing, houses, and even machinery, can conceivably be pushed beyond practical limits for any given

set of conditions. We are at present, however, far distant from such limits. In truth, they are beyond our present horizon, so that no one has cause to fear that we may become over-thrifty. It is true, however, that real thrift means devoting more and more attention to the development of the capacities of the human machine, not only its capacities for producing material goods but also its capacities for producing and enjoying the highest things of life.

In our careless thought and speech much passes for thrift that is not thrift. The Italian immigrant who starves his wife and takes his fourteen-year old boy from school to put him in a factory that he may help pay for a new home little knows the meaning of thrift. The father who sends to college his son who does not have the capacity to take advantage of his opportunities does not practice true thrift. The state which has an educational system poorly adapted to the needs of its children is not thrifty. The nation or society which, through lack of foresight, allows its governments to spend money recklessly, its railroads—the arteries of its industrial organization—to become almost hopelessly clogged, its great mass of working humanity and its captains of industry to get at such cross purposes that only 50 per cent to 75 per cent of possible production is realized while millions want and thousands actually starve for the necessities of life—that nation, society, or world certainly has some lessons to learn about true thrift.

We are so busy with the day's work that we neglect the future. The business man who is most intent upon making money, the banker who is popularly thought of as being most thrifty, the educator and the so-called states-

man who have no real vision are all akin to the thriftless fellow who is happy if he has a supper tonight, regardless of what the morrow may bring.

In fact, most of us are so absorbed with the things immediately before us that we do not have time to attend to our most important concerns. Every two years we elect to Congress and our legislatures men nominated by interested parties, or hale fellows well met, rather than take the time to attend the primaries and see that properly qualified men are nominated. Our civilization with its industrial, political and social organization has become so complex that our old machinery will not function efficiently and we are too busy to study the problems seriously and too short sighted to put in positions of responsibility men who are best qualified to guide us. After we elect our representatives, we do not let them concentrate their energies upon matters of moment. We fritter away their time by making them petty servants to look after pensions, allotments, appointments, post office buildings, river and harbor improvements and other matters of local interest. As a result they do not have time to consider duly how that this legislation or that legislation, or the lack of it, will stir the nation or the world from its foundations. For example, they do not see until it is too late, that the easy loan policy of financing a war carries with it the risk of upsetting standards of living, wages, and the whole industrial organization. The lack of a little foresight and judgment may easily nullify a generation of thrift education,

it may even throw the world into confusion.

Little wonder that domestic affairs run amuck, that civilization barely escapes annihilation. Possibly those who profess to be our leaders should receive the greatest censure. To them we look for guidance, but all of us are too much inclined to shift the blame. We ourselves are all responsible for selecting our leaders and hence for our leadership. Because of our lack of vision in the past the world has run riot.

But we are awaking to a realization of our plight. We are still groping to find our way out, but we are getting new ideas of industrial and social efficiency. We are coming to see that for a nation to prosper, to thrive in the true sense, thrift must mean much more to us than it has in the past. We are coming to learn that the essence of thrift lies in seeing the present and the future in their true relations, and then using all available means in such ways as to attain the greatest sum total of human welfare. This implies foresight, an appreciation of relative values and consequently of things most worth while, as well as some conception of practical methods of attaining them. We are coming to appreciate as never before that, "Where there is no vision the people perish." And so America has a new conception of thrift. Her people are less concerned about saving *per se*, but they are more concerned about conservation and proper utilization as a means to greater service, greater welfare and greater happiness.

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